

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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March 23, 2020

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND EMAIL
vice.president@whitehouse.gov

The Honorable Michael Pence
The White House
Office of the Vice President
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Unconstitutional call for Americans to make church donations during pandemic

Dear Mr. Vice President:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to your call for Americans to donate to their churches while they are closed due to COVID-19. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 31,000 members across the country. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

Multiple concerned members contacted us to report that at a March 21, 2020 Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, you told Americans that if they don't attend a church service due to the global pandemic, they should still "go ahead and make that donation."¹ You said that this religious fundraiser was something "the President and I promised" to say, and explained that "all ministries are continuing to play a vital role in our communities and we encourage your continued support."²

Churches and religious organizations are free to solicit donations and tithes for their ministries, but it is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the heads of the executive branch of the United States government to call on Americans to fund

¹ Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing (Mar. 21, 2020), *available at* www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-7/.

² *Id.*

religion. Leveraging a global pandemic to drum up church donations is an egregious betrayal of the country's founding principles in order to benefit religion.

Americans are fiercely struggling with the effects of the coronavirus, from falling dangerously ill to losing jobs and being stuck at home to care for family members who are without the care they have become accustomed to. Fortunately, we live in a time when such a severe virus is usually not lethal, and when many Americans may practice "social distancing" while working from home and choosing between an occasional grocery store trip or having their food delivered to their front door. These advances are because of *science* and *reason*, not because of religion.

Religion has never contributed to medical or scientific advancement, other than when it has shared a fraction of its almost limitless wealth with the secular world to fund secular research. Nowhere in the bible, or any other "holy book," will you find instructions for developing vaccines, building ventilators, or creating an online delivery service for food and other essentials. Instead, the bible provides exactly what one would expect from a book written by men thousands of years ago: superstition and patriarchal submission.

No American government official—especially the President and Vice President—should lend the power and prestige of their office to a particular church, or to religion in general. The Founders recognized the danger of aligning government with religion, which is why our founding documents specifically separate the two. In modern times, the Supreme Court has expressed this principle by stating that the government must not appear to "endorse" religion. There is scarcely a clearer endorsement than a direct solicitation for donations.

Your televised call for Americans to "go ahead and make that donation" is eerily reminiscent of the greed of President Trump's "spiritual advisor," televangelist Paula White. As a preacher of the "prosperity gospel," she regularly asked her viewers to "sow" (send her a check) four-figure donations.³ Every year, including 2020, White asks believers to send her their *first month* of income.⁴ It is embarrassing and imprudent to have such a transparent grifter as an advisor to the White House. The Vice President should not further encourage Americans to give their money to those who least deserve it.

³ See, e.g., www.christianpost.com/news/televangelist-paula-white-hawks-resurrection-life-1144-dollar-seed.html.

⁴ See paulawhite.org/firstfruits.html.

Instead, you should urge Americans to help where help is needed. There are myriad secular charities that are well positioned to alleviate Americans' suffering, and you could have used your platform to encourage Americans to donate to them. Money donated to churches is deflected from the organizations that can make a real difference. Americans need medical care and basic essentials, not more religion.

Today, more than one-quarter of Americans, 26%, are religiously unaffiliated.⁵ Younger Americans are not just religiously unaffiliated, they are largely atheist or agnostic. A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.⁶ In your personal capacity, you are welcome to donate to the church of your choice, but as Vice President, your official recommendation to promote religion alienates nonreligious Americans.

When you were named as the head of the Coronavirus Task Force, the choice was roundly ridiculed because of your history of religious zealotry and science denial. True to form, you immediately held a prayer session and the virus has since spread widely while the rest of the world warns its citizens to leave the United States because of our failure to adequately address the crisis. Please learn from your mistakes and work to provide real-world relief rather than perpetuating useless support for mythology and superstition.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-presidents

ALG/DB:rdj

⁵ Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, Public Religion Research Institute (Sept. 6, 2017), available at www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

⁶ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.